

Understanding Instructions

By Jacques Coulardeau

When young French students enter high school after studying four years of English, teachers discover that most of them do not know how to read instructions. Either they do not understand those instructions, or they skim through the instructions and fail in their tasks because they have not understood all the directions. Often, their general attitudes and concentration are the problem. Students sometimes relate to the instructions as if they were playing electronic or computer games, or they work through the tasks without spending much time on the explanations and descriptions of the tasks themselves.

Selected Strategies

To encourage students to pay attention to instructions, we used an authentic article entitled "The Best Time To Find A Doctor Is Before You Really Need One" which includes pictures. We devised a worksheet containing the following questions and instructions:

Look at the two pictures [not provided for this article], then answer the five following questions.

1. Do you know the two men in the pictures?
 2. What are their names?
 3. What is the fat one doing in the picture on the right?
 4. What is the thin one doing in the same picture?
 5. Could you describe the accident?
- If you can, go to part 2. If you cannot, answer the following questions, then go on.
6. Where is the thin one standing?
 7. Is the fat one wearing his coat?
 8. What is the thin one holding?
 9. What kind of an accident was it?

The objective of this exercise was to have the students consider the task as a whole and to read parts 1 and 2 before beginning the work. It is obvious that to continue the activity, students had to answer question five with either a yes or no. Students were not supposed to describe the picture. However, we found that many tried to do just that: Many students looked at the two pictures and described an accident. In other words, they did not follow the instruction, nor did they notice that the left picture was not a sequence of the right picture. The students' mistakes were that they did not focus on the right picture, as they were asked to do.

In a second exercise, students had to take into account the entire article and to use some cultural knowledge concerning humor.

- a. What is this article about?
- b. What is it promoting?

c. Do you find this article (one choice) good, humorous, banal, or sadistic?

II. Explain your selection for c above.

We always asked our learners to justify their answers because we often find out that either they cannot justify their first choices, so they choose something they can justify, or they change their minds and write explanations that do not address the choices selected. The objective is not only to make students react, but also to make them think about what they write.

This next set of questions, part III, has particular difficulties. The first one asks for information. The second asks for opinions also not in the text. The third needs a shift from we in the text to they in the question and answer. The fourth needs a good understanding of the word free. In the fifth the telephone number can be found nowhere in the document.

III. Read the text and answer the following questions.

- a. When is the best time to find a doctor?
- b. What makes it easy to find a doctor?
- c. What will they provide you with?
- d. How much will you have to pay?
- e. Where is the phone number to be found?

In parts IV and V, students must pay attention to the word different, which implies that the verbs is or be can only count once.

IV. Select five different verbs from the text.

V. Use these five verbs in sentences that are different from those in the text.

Part VII forces students to go back to the beginning of the worksheet.

VII. Pick out five words you do not understand. In an English dictionary find the definitions of these words. Tell what function you think these words play in the text: nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, etc. In an English-French dictionary, look for the proper translation (in the context) for each of these words.

Once again, to successfully complete this exercise, students must read all the sentences, though on the worksheet each instruction is visually separated. If they do not do this, they will not understand that English dictionary means an English-only dictionary. This is only made clear in the last sentence.

The next two parts must be answered together, and students can only do part IX if they have done VIII. Also part IX forces them to go back and justify their selections. However, most of the students do not consider part IX before finishing or even starting part VIII, in spite of the obvious need. The whole strategy in such instructions is to help students realize that in the

process of doing the tasks, they may need to go back and reevaluate what they have already answered.

VIII. What has this exercise made you do? (Choose the answers you consider right for your case).

- a. describe the pictures
- b. read and understand the text
- c. like doctors
- d. learn something about road accidents
- e. decide to wear a hat
- f. be careful with ladders
- g. get sick soon
- h. learn how to drive
- i. refuse to climb on roofs
- j. learn how to ski
- k. learn some new words (how many?)
- l. decide to go to the cinema
- m. use a dictionary
- n. other actions (specify)

IX. Find the elements in the document that made you select the actions you chose in VIII.

Other Objectives

We try to make our activities more global by using different authentic documents and focusing on different objectives. For example, when I used a short excerpt from *The Flying Deuces*, a Laurel and Hardy film that is very popular with students, I first showed the video excerpt. Then I used the audiotape to develop listening and understanding skills without the images and the script.

When I used the article on finding a doctor, I had students research medical studies in the United States and in France and compare them. Part of this work was done in coordination with the history and geography teacher who could explain the medical education system in the United States.

Conclusion

Improving the ability of students to deal with instructions is a long-term task because we live in a culture that emphasizes instant answers. But we can get some positive results if we prepare activities that focus on detailed instructions. These tasks must also contain items that force students to think and to read details. Fortunately, through constant practice, most students are able to learn how to use logic and to take their time to read for details.

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